

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*



# Good Heavens!

## Texas Churches Grow to Biblical Proportions

By Jennifer S. Evans-Cowley

Texans are known worldwide for their love of big things. Big ranches. Big trucks. Big homes. It's no wonder that megachurches — the latest “big” trend — have caught on here.

**AMPLE PARKING**  
*is a must for megachurches. Newly constructed megachurches such as this include parking to accommodate present and future needs. Parking requirements may make properties such as former big box stores and industrial-manufacturing facilities suitable for conversion.*



In 1970 only ten megachurches existed nationwide, according to *Church Growth Today*. This figure grew to 250 by 1990 and 740 by 2003. In 2006 there were 177 megachurches in Texas alone, according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

What is a megachurch? According to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, a megachurch has a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more at its worship services. Numerous churches in Texas vastly exceed this attendance (Table 1 lists the largest); in fact, Texas is home to

three of the ten largest megachurches in the nation (Table 2).

Eddie Gibbs, a professor at the Fuller Theological Seminary, explains that megachurches “give people a feeling of anonymity.” That’s particularly important, he says, to “those who have been hurt or burnt out in smaller churches.” Gibbs asserts that megachurches have effectively reached out to young people by providing an entertainment-based Christian culture, including services that resemble rock concerts.

Texas’ (and the nation’s) largest megachurch is Lakewood Church (above), housed in downtown Houston’s Compaq Center, the former arena of the Houston Rockets. Lakewood spent \$75 million to renovate the arena and is paying \$12.1 million in rent to the City of Houston for the next 30 years, with an option to extend the lease for an additional 30 years for \$22.6 million.

Why the Compaq Center? Lakewood Church had leased the facility for special events and realized it would be an ideal venue for weekly services. Lakewood services include a band, theatrical lighting and projection screens, all of which can be easily accommodated by the former special events facility.

**Table 1. Biggest Texas Megachurches**

Church	City	Average Weekly Attendance
Lakewood Church	Houston	30,000
Fellowship Church	Grapevine	19,500
The Potter’s House	Dallas	18,500
Second Baptist Church	Houston	16,000
Prestonwood Baptist Church	Plano	15,000
Windsor Village United Methodist Church	Houston	13,498
Brentwood Baptist	Houston	11,000
New Light Christian Center	Houston	10,000
Community Bible Church	San Antonio	9,000
Covenant Church	Carrollton	8,500
Shoreline Christian Center	Austin	8,000
Cornerstone Church	San Antonio	8,000
Fellowship of the Woodlands	The Woodlands	8,000
Saint John’s Baptist Church	Grand Prairie	7,500
Lake Pointe Baptist Church	Rockwall	6,500
Custer Road United Methodist Church	Plano	6,411
High Point Church	Arlington	6,000
Park Cities Presbyterian Church	Dallas	5,000
Denton Bible Church	Denton	5,000
The Fountain of Praise	Houston	5,000
Champion Forest Baptist	Houston	5,000
First Baptist Church Houston	Houston	5,000
Benny Hinn Ministries	Irving	5,000
Fellowship Bible Church North	Plano	5,000

Source: Hartford Institute for Religion Research (<http://hirr.hartsem.edu>)

**Table 2. Ten Largest U.S. Megachurches**

City	Name of Church	Average Weekly Attendance
Houston, TX	Lakewood Church	30,000
Lake Forest, CA	Saddleback Valley Community Church	22,000
South Barrington, IL	Willow Creek Community Church	20,000
Louisville, KY	Southeast Christian Church	18,757
Dallas, TX	The Potter's House	18,500
Lithonia, GA	New Birth Missionary Baptist Church	18,000
Fort Lauderdale, FL	Calvary Chapel	18,000
Los Angeles, CA	Crenshaw Christian Center	17,000
Santa Ana, CA	Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa	16,500
Houston, TX	Second Baptist Church	16,000

Source: Hartford Institute for Religion Research (<http://hrr.hartsem.edu>)

The church needed room for a supersized congregation as well. With seating for 16,000, the Compaq Center met that need.

What other real estate needs do megachurches have? They need large parking lots. The buildings themselves need large open spaces with clear sight lines. Theater-style seating is a plus.

Many megachurches are looking to create large, corporate-like campuses. Some are building satellite campuses. First Baptist Church in Tampa, Florida, acquired a 48-acre site for a new campus to serve its 3,500 worshippers. Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano is planning a second location in Prosper, near the Dallas Parkway and SH 380. The project is in its infancy, with the design and features to be determined. Some churches are actively acquiring land as suburban growth occurs, often years before they plan to build facilities, to secure sites before land prices escalate.

Churches have even found that empty big box stores may meet the needs of growing congregations. These properties

provide large spaces in high visibility locations that are convenient to worshippers, and parking is plentiful. Cities throughout Texas have seen former grocery stores converted into churches.

Beyond the big box, churches have found locations in other types of facilities. High-Point Church in Arlington started in the minister's living room, then moved to the Bob Duncan Community Center and from there to the auditorium of Workman Junior High School. Its current home is a 423,000-square-foot former Johnson & Johnson facility. The renovated property opened in 2004 and includes a 5,000-seat auditorium, café and school.

Without question, Texas is big on megachurches. Whether through new construction or adaptive reuse, churches are looking for larger locations. Real estate licensees can assist churches by identifying existing properties that could be adapted into large auditoriums and classroom spaces, particularly those that would allow for building expansion as congregations grow. ➤

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## THE TAKEAWAY

Megachurches — churches with an average weekly attendance of 2,000 — are springing up throughout Texas. These churches are looking for large parcels with abundant parking. Former retail, industrial and other large facilities are strong candidates for adaptive reuse by growing churches.



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**Tierra Grande** (ISSN 1070-0234) is published quarterly by the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843-2115. Subscriptions are free to Texas real estate licensees. Other subscribers, \$20 per year. Views expressed are those of the authors and do not imply endorsement by the Real Estate Center, Mays Business School or Texas A&M University. The Texas A&M University System serves people of all ages, regardless of socioeconomic level, race, color, sex, religion, disability or national origin. Photography/Illustrations: Bob Beals II, pp. 1, 2.